

A young scholar defends his homeland.

What It Means to be a Southerner

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IT IS APPARENT to many people that the South is today the one last stronghold of regional consciousness in the United States: the only portion of the country which can be said to have distinctive ways of looking at things—whether social, political, economic, or religious—and to speak with anything like one voice, anything like unanimity of opinion in the expression of those attitudes. Few bother to ask what the West will think about some new civil rights bill in Congress, or to consider the effect of a new pronouncement from the Vatican on the churches of New England. But the South remains an entity, however poorly defined in the minds of most Americans. For some of them it is a land of sudden and inexplicable violence, hot passionate hatreds which sometimes cool down enough to be called simply prejudices, a region fiercely zealous for what it calls its rights, brooking no interference from either secular or religious authorities.

The Southerner who lives or travels in another part of the country is constantly called on to explain to the rest of the world his native land and its people; sometimes he is even called on to apologize for it.

People in the East and in the Midwest want to know how he can, as a rational human being in the twentieth century, hold some of the “outmoded” opinions that he does on economic, religious, and “social” questions. After all, this is the age of science and progress. Why is the Southerner, then, so prejudiced? Well, then, what does it mean to be a Southerner?

First of all, to be a Southerner is to have something called an historical consciousness. Southerners are frequently accused of ancestor worship, living in the past, not keeping up with the times, and finally, with that most heinous indictment of all, of not being “progressive.” For the Southerner, history is a part of himself and his “background”—one of those shadowy words which people like school teachers and scholars often use to throw dust into the enemy’s eyes. The Southerner’s historical consciousness flies directly in the face of the assumptions made by the scientific world, which may, for our purposes, be easily identified with the more industrial and “progressive” North and East.

For the gentlemen of science are convinced that a historical “bias” is bad; and,

indeed, so great is the prestige of the scientific method in our day that many historians believe that it is really possible to write history without bias, prejudice, fear, or favor. On the other hand, I believe that the Southerner is inclined to disagree with this assumption, whether he has ever gotten around to thinking about it or not. For the Southerner believes that, since we live in a world in which space and time help to define all that passes for experience, space and time must be pretty important, so important, in fact, that one cannot hope to dissociate experience from them without encountering certain grave perils, perhaps even, if I may be so bold, the peril of madness and Hell. The Southerner's religion, about which I shall have more to say presently, commits him to believing that God Almighty has sanctified this terrestrial world in which we live and that the ultimate sign of His approval is evidenced in the fact that He saw fit to make the supreme revelation of Himself to sinful men in the Person of Jesus Christ, a very real man who was none the less perfect, a very real man living in time and space who was nevertheless God Himself.

Therefore the Southerner knows that it is foolish, if not downright impious, to try to see persons or events in any guise but the historical. For it is the Southerner's persuasion that it is only in history that we may know eternity. Thus the Southerner is never content to know to *whom* something happened. It is equally important to know *where* and *when* it happened. In other words, it is this totality of experience, this concern not only with *who* and *what* but also *where* and *when*, which constitutes the Southerner's historical consciousness.

I should be misleading if I were not quick to admit that this gift (and indeed it is a gracious one) can be used in the wrong way, as all gifts can. Used perversely, it can lead to an absurd preoccupation with history, as is evidenced in the super-patriotic societies which seek to confer on themselves the meritorious attributes of their illustrious, but quite dead, forebears.

It can lead to a narrow sectionalism which is unwilling to admit that there is anything to be said for the interests of Northern industry and labor, or that there is anything good about living in Boston or farming in Nebraska. These are the people who spend their time wondering, among other things, what might have happened if France and England had intervened on the side of the Confederacy or if Stonewall Jackson had not been killed at Chancellorsville. They are ungracious when they visit other regions and earn, for the whole South, the judgment of bigotry and ignorance and thus make the task of the Southerner of good will (and I sometimes wonder how many of these blessed, if somewhat apocryphal, creatures there really are) even harder than it is.

In the second place, to be a Southerner is to be tolerant, in the best sense of that much abused word. I know this observation will come as a surprise to those who have had their thinking (if indeed it can be called that) directed by the minions of Madison Avenue and the other demoniacal powers of the world of mass communication. But Southerners are really very tolerant and quite peaceably inclined, despite the accounts circulated in the national press about lynching, mob violence, and so forth. Everyone who has had any real knowledge of Southern affairs knows that race relations have steadily improved since the Civil War until the present. Where else in the world can one see two widely disparate peoples (disparate in the sense of economics, tradition, and education, but not necessarily in the sense of native endowment), one of whom is but three or four generations removed from slavery, living together in a state of peace and comparative harmony? Have there been race riots in Memphis or Atlanta to compare with those in Chicago or Detroit? Is our so-called discrimination or segregation any worse than the smugly hypocritical restrictions of the North and East which force many Negro children to go to schools that are segregated by the insidious device of "zoning"?

Is this any worse than the fact that there is not one important professorship or administrative position at Harvard or Yale or at any other great "national" school held by a Negro? Is it any worse than the pharisaical duplicity which, until recently, denied Marian Anderson a hotel room in New York after she had given a concert before a capacity audience at Carnegie Hall?

But Southerners are tolerant, I maintain. And I think I know why. It is because they are not so foolish as to believe that there are no differences between people, in spite of what the august gentlemen of the Supreme Court may say. The Southerner knows that people *are* different, that they were created by God Almighty different so that they might reflect back to Him His inscrutable glory in all its rich perfection. This, of course, does not mean that all men are not equal; all this stir about "equality" is really due to a perversion of the idea of unity in diversity. For I suspect that what the Southerner is most vitally concerned about is not the preservation of unequal status, but the preservation of the characteristic racial differences, to lose which would seem, to him, disastrous. Therefore, when he talks about preserving racial integrity, he is not merely talking a lot of nonsense designed to hide the fact that he is in reality plotting to hold the Negro in abject bondage for another three hundred years. He is vitally concerned, instead, to preserve both for himself and his black brother their own racial (and therefore personal) identities, the loss of which would produce a mass of people who would surely be neither "racial," "regional," nor "equal," except insofar as they were all equally depersonalized creatures, lacking racial or cultural identity. The Southerner knows that under any such mongrelization everybody would lose.

But, as I have said, Southerners are tolerant and, above all, charitable. For the most part, they have dealt fairly with their less fortunate brethren, both black and white, because they can never regard people

as less than individuals, less than total personalities. The Southerner does not believe that you can abstract from the individual his identity and treat him as a ward of the state, a "client" on "relief," or as the object of a "social program" without compromising his integrity. He knows that "relief" comes from the head, but "charity" comes from the heart. This is why the "welfare" programs have been more backward in the South than they have in more "progressive" parts of the country. Indeed, I am inclined to think that this reluctance of the Southerner to employ public support for private charity is a more important factor in this so-called "culture lag" than the more obvious lack of funds.

This charity, as I have intimated, is the result of the Southerner's refusal to see people in the mass, on a statistical chart, in the abstract, or in any other guise than what they are—immortal souls, all equally precious in the sight of God. This assumption underlies his whole thinking on the racial problem and on programs for social betterment at public expense. It explains his vital interest in people, not simply as objects of scientific study, but as real, live individuals, with good traits, lamentable faults, and all else that flesh is heir to. This is the reason that Southerners do not, on the whole, make good reformers—because they know too much about man's nature already and do not hope to remake the world tomorrow morning by having a group of sociologists and city planning experts sit down around a conference table in Washington or New York. For Southerners have always distrusted secular solutions to problems, both of the flesh and of the spirit; such solutions seem too often to treat the human being as a thing rather than a person. And for this reason many Southerners have resented and fought such agencies as the W. P. A. and even the T. V. A., though it was not often to their economic advantage to do so. Such assumptions lie equally behind the Southerner's militant hostility to the N. A. A. C. P.

It follows from what I have just said that

a Southerner is an individualist and, if necessary, a non-conformist. One of the most distressing of his characteristics—at least, for people in other parts of the country—is his unwillingness to be pigeon-holed or forced into the Procrustean bed of any kind of pattern or scheme. He respects the right of any individual to differ with him, but he also demands the right to form his own opinions and to make decisions concerning his own affairs in accord with what he thinks are his best interests, regardless of what someone on a Northern magazine thinks. In everything that he does the Southerner insists on acting as a total personality, as a whole man. The schizophrenia of the divided personality, that peculiar curse of the industrial society in which the individual *thinks* in accordance with one set of ideas, such as “efficiency,” “mass production,” “exploitation,” (which he probably calls “development,”) and yet *feels* in accordance with an older and more compassionate sensibility, is a fairly uncommon phenomenon in the South. I should add, though, that there are many people who are all too eager to find the solution to all the South’s problems—social and economic—in a thorough-going industrialization of the region and thus to create in the South the same apocalyptic conditions which they abhor elsewhere.

Subsumed under the historical consciousness mentioned previously, but worthy of treatment by itself, is another item in the Southerner’s creed-tradition. The South is surely one of the last strongholds of the life of tradition, of doing things as they have been done for a long time, not from any idolatrous sense of duty, but because subordination to tradition is a means of defining one’s direction in life and of giving one’s whole life greater dimension and depth. Tradition is a sort of secular Communion of the Saints, if you will, which ties in the living with those who have gone before and with those who are yet to come, with all the company of Heaven. This reverence for tradition does not end in serving tradition for its own sake, which at best is

a sort of Shintoism; but it results in a using of tradition, and all the defined conditions which are a part of tradition, as a means of giving the fullest expression to the individual self. Tradition provides the justification or warrant for using one’s own circumscribed existence as a sort of focus, as it were, of all that is good and true in life; and thereby the individual life is given depth and grounding in something larger, something perhaps eternal.

This fact accounts, to my mind, for the glorious Renaissance now being enjoyed by Southern literature. Everywhere people are talking about William Faulkner, surely the most distinguished living American writer and by some people regarded as the twentieth-century world’s greatest. They are talking about Eudora Welty, that marvelously gifted writer from Jackson, Mississippi, who has shown a vast knowledge of the affairs of the human heart and yet a humble reverence for the heart’s reasons which cannot be searched out, and about Robert Penn Warren, who has realized in the historical novel what many people feel are its most ambitious possibilities. In the scholarly and critical world the names of Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and Donald Davidson—all Southerners and all, in some sense, traditionalists—are acclaimed. For, indeed, it is this fact of tradition which is the Southern writer’s peculiar and precious heritage. He has a focus, a flexible and yet unyielding form ready to hand in which to express his ideas on life and death and love and hate and all the other sad and yet true and beautiful themes which have ever been the subject of the world’s greatest literature. Thus the Southern writer never writes in a vacuum, the way such “realists” as Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis often do. Instead of simply *who* and *what*, the subjects with which most modern authors—poets, playwrights, novelists, and all—are concerned, the Southern author has, in addition, two more things: *when* and *where*. That these two additional “forms” are of ultimate importance is shown by the fact that it is

the Southern author's firm conviction that it is only when you know the *when* and the *where*, as well as the *who* and the *what*, that you can really know the *why*, which is perhaps the most important question that the artist, or for that matter any of us, is ever called on to answer. The Southern writer, therefore, can never treat his material in any other way than this. He must see his characters as whole, total personalities, living in a particular time and place, working out their individual salvations in particular terms, never saved by programs or subsidies, but by something without, above and beyond, perhaps, finally, by the saving Word itself.

And this brings me to my last point about the Southerner, a point which I do not venture to treat lightly for it seems to me one of the most "Southern" of his attributes. It is one which has been misunderstood again and again, often denounced and sometimes mocked; yet it cannot be ignored. It is the Southerner's religion—his Christianity. The South is sometimes called, by people in more "enlightened" parts of the country, the Bible Belt. H. L. Mencken and others were convinced that this fact—the South's fiercely Protestant Christianity—militated strongly against the South's ever producing anything of permanent artistic worth. To such critics the South was the "Sahara of the Bozart." And it is a familiar jibe in the popular press that Tennesseans are still uneasy because Clarence Darrow made a monkey out of William Jennings Bryan, in more ways than one. The South comes in for some more condescension on the part of the more Catholic-minded Christians, who are convinced that the Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians of the South cannot know the full joys of the redeemed unless they become Roman Catholics or, at the very least, High Church Episcopalians. Such Catholic critics seem to be unaware that, up until now, the South has never felt the need for more tradition, more history, or more Apostolic Succession in its Christianity. It has been quite well content with

such tradition as a close scrutiny of the King James Bible (sometimes to the point of the ridiculous) has been able to produce. By and large, the South has just about as much time for the Pope as it does for a New York sociologist—and for the same reasons: that both would tend to deprive it of its peculiar heritage and treat it in accordance with an abstract principle of "conformity," which is really what the lamenters of social injustice in the South are advocating when they beat the drums for "equality." (Indeed, I have privately begun to suspect that what the social-justice zealots really want is not so much "equality" or even "conformity" as "mediocrity." And the South has always declined to be mediocre, whatever else it may have been.)

But the South's religion has been a part of its living tradition; it has even formed a part of its mythic consciousness, as we know from the stories of Roark Bradford. The same folk spirit that has sung about Davy Crockett and Casey Jones has shown an equal gift for shaping its whole vital consciousness around the fearful but marvelous humanity of the patriarchs and apostles and finally around the scandal, mystery, and glory of the Incarnation itself. The South's Christianity, by definition overwhelmingly Protestant, has commanded individuality and tolerance—sometimes to the point of complete anarchy in religious affairs. And yet this is always the price of freedom, one of its concomitant risks which must be accepted with responsibility and good will. As one would expect, the South has remained fiercely opposed to external authority in religion as in other matters, still upholding the right (I would almost say the duty) of individual choice and determination. And although this may at times lead to schism and finally to heresy, the South has been willing to take the risk. However, I will go further and say that this militantly Protestant Christianity, like the more secular "tradition" mentioned previously, has helped to provide the spiritual climate necessary for the modern Southern

writer's uniqueness. For any Southern writer must have grown up believing that he must work out his own salvation in fear and trembling and that the wind still bloweth where it listeth.

The fierce Calvinism which infected even the non-Calvinistic churches of the South made it difficult for the Southern writer to trust abstract human reason because he had grown up believing that it was so corrupted by sin that it could not, by searching, find out either God or the truth. All revelation, all justification, must come from God. And this combination of secular and religious tradition, I am happy to think, persuaded the Southern artist not to waste his time in vain endeavors to fabricate a "romantic" myth after the fashion of Henry James, who had to turn to Europe for the tradition of which industrial New England had been bereft, or a "realistic" myth like the later proletarian writers, who hoped to be saved by the abstraction of social consciousness. Rather, the Southern writer has been content to accept, as myth, the traditional life in which he naturally found himself, hoping to discern in the sound and the fury that central peace which is the form of art, giving perhaps no answers but being content to raise the same old questions about life and death, those imponderables, without examining which life would not be worth the living. Finally, the Southern artist's peculiar method may be seen as that of shaping and forming, for purposes of artistic expression, his imaginative experience by means of a living tradition, not asking as the humanists and scientists do, *what* is the truth but, more significantly, *Who* is the truth, asking finally the artist's ultimate question: how can I become a part of the truth, what must I do to be saved?

In closing, I say that I have not presumed to treat the subject of Southern characteristics exhaustively here. I could mention many more of the Southerner's peculiar traits: his love of land as a living symbol of God's providence—almost a sacrament, his hospitality, his native friendliness and warmth, his generosity to those

less fortunate. On the other hand, there are some things that are not altogether to his credit. Many of these virtues which are in themselves so praiseworthy can be subverted from their proper ends, and certainly the Southerner's quite proper pride in his individuality and his region can become pernicious if allowed to run rampant over the interests and affections of others. Indeed, William Alexander Percy, the lawyer-poet of the Delta, said that one possible cause of strained relations between North and South in the decade before the Civil War was the fact that Southerners stopped thinking they were simply as good as anybody else and began thinking they were better than anyone else. And, as Eudora Welty has shown, the characteristic Southern life of the warm and loving family circle, the life which Stark Young, the drama critic and novelist from Mississippi, has called "the life of the affections," can become a living Hell when this love is diverted from its ultimate end (the love of God and one's neighbor) and is used and exploited for purely selfish purposes. But this is all by way of saying that these virtues, which I have called characteristically Southern, are no different from any other. They can be thrown over in favor of "science" and "progress"; and William Faulkner and the best Southern writers can still be renounced for the ravening wolves of the writers' conferences, who assume that writing, like any other "science," can be taught and mastered.

But the best of the Southern writers point the way to what is best in Southern life and Southern society. I should like to think that they constitute, for the Southerner, a great cloud of witnesses, encompassing him with the forceful imperative of their example, and pointing toward the surpassingly rich inheritance, the Psalmist's goodly heritage, which is the Southerner's portion—a life of the affections, a wholesome fear of God's judgment and an earnest longing for the redemptive grace of His saving Word, and finally, with all His saints, the hope of glory.